



OLD ROBERTSON'S RANCH.

BY CHARLES B. LEWIS.

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PART I.

Here on the road between Fort Yuba and the town of San Quin, twenty steps from the west bank of Dog creek, and having hills to the north and ten-mile plain to the south, stands Robertson's ranch. The name "ranch" is a misnomer. There are no horses or cattle—no farming. In other days, when the stage took this route, it was a road house. It is a road house yet, but fallen into decay and having so bad a reputation that both civil and military authorities keep an eye on it. There are two adobe buildings—a house and a shed barn. There is no inclosure—no shade—no surroundings except a stack of wiry hay, a broken-down wagon and a heap of poles which have been brought from the hills for firewood. It is a lonely, evil-looking place, and with three or four men skulking about it would be a nervous tenderfoot who would dismount at the door, even at broad noonday.

It is 3 o'clock in the afternoon of an August day, and the sun is bolting down on Robertson's ranch in a way to burn the grass out by the roots. Stretched at full length on the floor of the bar room, with a saddle for a pillow, is John Robertson, a grizzled, weather-beaten man of fifty, who has been asleep for an hour. A door leading into what seems to be a living room softly opens and a girl steps into the bar room, looks about inquiringly, and then walks to the front door and gazes up the trail leading away. A moment later, the one man of more than a hundred travelers—gave a start of surprise at seeing Kit Robertson about the ranch between the years 1872 and 1875. A girl of seventeen or eighteen, trim of figure, small hands, dark hair, dark eyes, dark hair, blue eyes and a face which would have attracted a second look on 5th avenue. Her apparel was coarse, but well-fitting, and was what might be called "half-Mexican-half-civilized."

"Well, dad?"

A mile or more up the trail the girl had caught sight of a horseman headed for the ranch.

"Eh, Kit, what is it?" growls the half-man in reply.

"Humph!"

He yawned, turned over on his side, rubbed his eyes and slowly got up and staggered over to the door. After a look up the trail he said:

"Better vamoose."

With a start she turned and made her way to the rear room, but she did not stop there. She passed out of the side door and out to the shed and around to the shady side of it and sat down with her back to the wall. By the time the stranger horseman had come up old Robertson was very much awake, and met him with a smile and a nod.

"Hott!" muttered the stranger.

"Hot as—"

"You are John Robertson?"

"You bet."

The stranger turned his horse loose and entered the bar room. He wasn't a tender-

"Are you my real dad?" she demanded, as she looked into his eyes.

"That's the third time you've asked that question within two years!" he sternly replied, "and I'd like to know what's come over ye. If I ain't yer daddy, what ye done to him? What am I takin' keev or ye?"

"Who's him talkin' to ye?"

"Nobody."

"Then drop it! I don't blame ye for being tired of the ranch and the folks and the hull blamed althit fur a hundred miles around, come as I am myself, but where kin we leave? What we got to do?"

"What don't ye wait till I make a raise?"

"Then you are my real daddy?" she persisted.

"Kit, I never laid a hand on ye in my life!" he whispered, "but don't drive us too fur! Shut up on sich talk or sunthin'll happen! It looks like ye wanted



"Ever hear of Jim Finch?"

to disown yer parent and cut sticks, and such things rile me!"

She entered the back room without another word, and Old Robertson was left alone with the girl. Jim Finch stood up. The two walked off to the shed and sat down in the same place as before and held a conversation lasting for an hour. Then Jim handed over a small bottle, laughing as he did so, and rode back over the trail alone. The girl Kit saw the bottle on the wing—saw her father with the bottle in his hand—and there was a look of mingled resolution and anxiety in her eyes as she said to herself:

"I hoped she had given it up, but they are going ahead, and now I must think of some plan to beat the game and yet save daddy."

"They've all got it and it's been drugged! Daddy fixed to drug the coffee, but I beat him at it. He's out now to meet a gang and bring 'em in to get the safe, and you'd better see how your men are!"

The clerk came out at that moment, and the captain with him, and the two men started for the shed. It was

"Dad! Didn't tell you to warn 'em?"

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